**Review**

# *Language as Symbolic Power*
## Claire Kramsch (2020)

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*Reviewed by Ari Sherris*

In a thoughtful and engaging book, Claire Kramsch, Emerita Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, makes an insightful and erudite case for the symbolic power of language. Of considerable delight for this reader is the post-mortem of Donald Trump's language, which the monograph vividly unfolds around issues that will likely resonate in U.S. political history for many years to come. Trenchant analyses of POTUS 45's distortions of fact and abusive travesties of language from his reality TV-style campaign and presidency appear throughout the book.

Reading Kramsch's accounts, I visualize Donald Trump's pursed lips and flapping arms at his podium in the White House and at his political rallies which continued through his presidency. I see him waddling on foot to U.S. Airforce One and stopping to spit out his dross to the press in news clips social mediatized, no less than from his inflammatory twitter feed – insults, invectives, and slights – all the symbolic sewage continuously providing the pungent stench of Trumpian post-truth. Assuming, of course, the settler colonial legacy ever knew truth in Empire USA. But I will save that discourse for another time, not this one. Kramsch's book tears apart the political narratives of this populist political buffoon while Kramsch remains – as always – the consummate teacher, careful to explicate her reasoning.

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Moreover, Kramsch helps us to understand the symbolic power of language even in the most mundane interactions, not just the language of the powerful from media, politics, or popular culture. She also deftly discusses the blurred or fluid lines between off and online worlds, the multimodal literacies that are at play – part and parcel of symbolic representation at this moment in human history.

After the acknowledgements and an introduction, the monograph is divided into three parts that make the cases, separate and related, for the power of symbolic representation (chapters 1 to 3), the power of symbolic action (chapters 4 to 6), and that of symbolic reality (chapters 7 to 9). The book concludes making the case for language as the measure of our symbolic lives. Kramsch orchestrates a well-organized argument, marshalling out the evidence with felicitous evaluative and creative import.

The book frames discussions of language education through three lenses: normativity, ethics, and political answerability. Kramsch grapples with the most pressing questions in language education. She asks which rules of language, rules of silence, and controversial topics become either explicit or implicit governing factors at play in the teaching-learning dynamic and why. She goes on to ask what values and norms do not enter our classrooms, why is this and should it be? Not to be remiss, she probes the ways in which language shapes mundane interactions across our lived experiences – the politics of our lives through languages and the ways we bring in slices of spaces beyond the classroom, careful as ever to be socially semiotic too. Hers is the voice of a seasoned language educator whose critical care and embrace of humanity speaks out and infuses her more abstract discussions.

The introduction and Chapters 1 to 9 each conclude with suggestions for further reading. The book also has a glossary of terms (that includes, e.g., algorithm, dialogism, documediality, indexicality, interpellation, performance vs. performativity, representation, simulacrum, vicarious speech, and so much more). The glossary is followed by detailed endnotes for Chapters 1 to 9, the introduction and the conclusion. The endnotes are followed by a references section and an index. Large entries in the index include those on Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, whose ideas, along with those of many others, inform Kramsch's original analyses.

The monograph's introduction gives us the lay of the land in its discussions of symbolic action, the paradox of symbolic power, relationships to applied linguistics and language education, definitions, and the book's organization. Kramsch tells us her aim is 'to shift focus from the instrumental to the symbolic dimensions of language that account for its awesome power to affect people's view of themselves and the world (…) language as a discourse with symbolic

effects' (p. 3). As she makes her case, she tells us the effects will often be paradoxical because the symbolic power of language can be different things within different contexts or with respect to different people.

Chapter 1 is a straightforward presentation of four facets of symbolic power (i.e., signification, interpretation, manipulation, and meaning construction). The chapter draws on Saussure, G. Lakoff, C. S. Peirce, P. Grice, M. Silverman, R. Barthes, and R. Jakobson among others as it demonstrates its points through accessible discussions of Trump's interactions, a short poem by Emily Dickinson, and a humorous Swiss story from U.S. German language textbooks from the 1970s.

Chapter 2 opens with an account of Jean de la Fontaine's fable 'The Wolf and the Lamb', which is also the subject of the cover illustration by Gustave Doré. The chapter continues with more everyday illustrations of, say, the mundane symbolic power of the author's 2-year-old grandson's power struggle to get his way or greetings and phatic communion – such as comments on the weather. The chapter focuses on three takes on symbolic representation – as much embodied schema of knowledge; staged performance of speech acts; and an act of delegation. Kramsch argues that in all three takes, symbolic representation 'is a view of the world that encapsulates our innermost desires, perceptions, memories and aspirations and is therefore prone to manipulation by self and others' (p. 55), which she illustrates adroitly throughout the chapter.

Chapter 3 looks at symbolic power as narrative power in examples of German, French, and U.S. children's literature from the 1800s, 1930s, 1960s, 1990s, and 2000s. Kramsch's trenchant analyses of values, mores, and emotions in these narratives continue to explicate the symbolic power of language. The chapter concludes by discussing political narratives from the U.S., tying some of them to U.S. children's literature from the earlier discussion such as libertarians (*The Little Engine that Could*); Silicon Valley globalized Americans (*The Cat in the Hat*); multicultural American narratives across genders, races and ethnic groups (*Last Stop on Market Street*); Trump's America First white-supremacist agenda; Mercantilists; and the talented community model harmonizing the world in an information age.

Chapter 4 is the beginning of Part II, an exposé on the power of symbolic action. Kramsch examines a Senate hearing into Trump's obstruction of justice surrounding Michael Flynn, Trump's former national security advisor, regarding possible collusion with Russia, and the former FBI director James Comey's testimony. Kramsch skillfully draws on the performative and institutional theories of symbolic action, structural and post-structural in kind, as well as notions of

participation framework and politeness. In her analyses she unravels avoidance tactics, varying degrees of responsibility, and Trump's attempts to rally support and leverage as well as test loyalty. Even the interactions between Comey and senators are material for her scrutiny of symbolic power.

In Chapter 5, Kramsch opens with counterintuitive positioning on the concept of symbolic violence when she presents online anecdotes of first experiences of 'I love you' from 18–22-year-old students. I found myself reading each with fascination as I wondered just how these might be charged with symbolic violence. Kramsch shows us how in each anecdote 'an explicit expression of love is perceived as problematic because it might not match the setting or the circumstance' (p. 98). The chapter goes on to discuss that perceptions of symbolic violence differ across contexts and situations. Drawing on Bourdieu, Kramsch analyzes euphemisms, bragging, and gift-giving and demonstrates that 'symbolic power always entails symbolic violence *but it never does that without the agreement of the people involved*' (p. 115, author's italics).

Chapter 6 is a case study of symbolic warfare, with data from Donald Trump's arsenal of language that Kramsch terms 'a multi-facetted verbal profile of the commander-in-chief' (p. 118). Examples of Trump's verbal profile that Kramsch analyzes include indirect speech acts (dog whistles, coded discourse); the promotion of a sense of uncertainty; hyperbole; manipulation of allegiance and loyalty; exploitation of fears across bait-and-switch positionings; discourse shifts when facing the camera as opposed to when facing an interviewer; affixing of insult epithets to his opponents; and tweets 'eerily reminiscent of Stalinist times' (p. 128). Kramsch also lists Bob Woodward's findings from his interviews with Trump, characterizing them as behavioral principles that indicate how Trump manipulates 'interactional context' (pp. 126–127). The case study is a tour de force of scholarship and originality.

Chapter 7 takes the reader into the monograph's final part, 'The Power to Create Symbolic Reality' (p. 133). The chapter focuses on how digital technologies are used to design new symbolic realities. Kramsch takes us through late modern theories that explain the blending of online and offline worlds. She explores loaded equivocalities and paradoxes at play in social media performances of authenticity which she carefully shows run parallel to Foucault's concepts of visibility, conformity, and veridiction and which explicate a social mediatic hold on symbolic power. For as Kramsch writes, 'Through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other social media, (…) memes construct an alternative symbolic universe in which Internet users can build alternative identities and avatars' (p. 138).

In Chapter 8, 'Language as Symbolic Power in the Digital Age', Kramsch considers 'how the Web and social media have changed the epistemological, social and cultural landscape as well as increased our capacity to create, store, disseminate and impose meaning, and to use the power of institutions to have these meanings accepted as legitimate' (p. 155). Kramsch brings in many sources (Harcourt, Mathias, Vaidhyanathan, and others) to produce a provocative introduction to topics of great interest today, such as the epistemic power of Google's search engine, including a focus on how it impinges on scholarly activities and manipulates their value as the technology plays to the prevailing group. The chapter discusses Google, Facebook, Twitter, algorithmic harvests of user data, and a social revolution in how we conceptualize ourselves, each other, knowledge, and truth as well as disinformation or post-truth.

Chapter 9 raises three questions, 'How are we to conceive of [time, space and causality] (…) when studying and teaching languages as a human activity? How can learning another language help us better understand the symbolic complexity of the human condition? And how can it enable us to respond to symbolic violence?' (p. 174). The chapter seeks answers to these questions from the work of Judith Butler, Michel de Certeau, Mikhail Bakhtin, Pierre Bourdieu, and Alistair Pennycook. As the chapter moves forward, we learn of the role of performatives, perlocutionary speech acts, and linguistic vulnerability as conceptualized by Butler. Next, we focus on small-scale strategies and tactics from Michel de Certeau's work as Kramsch describes it. After that, it is on to Bakhtin's concepts of the chronotope, humor, and the carnivalesque, then on to Bourdieu's concept of social space, causality, habitus, and bodily knowledge. The chapter concludes with Pennycook's post-humanism, which de-centers humans and expands the concepts of assemblage and entanglement. Many of these ideas can be traced to others; for example, entanglement draws from Karin Barad's (2007) concept of agential realism. Kramsch is careful to discuss the historic links to others.

Kramsch's conclusion presents a summary of the book, a consideration of its value for applied linguistics and language education, and a discussion of a parable that Toni Morrison shared from her 1993 Nobel lecture. Among the fundamental values Kramsch emphasizes are carrying on research that uses post-structuralist/post-modernist lenses as well as raising political and ethical questions across applied linguistic endeavors. Poignantly she writes, 'viewing language as symbolic power prompts us to question the relation of research and practice in applied linguistics and to investigate the extent to which the solving of real-world problems risks being hijacked by professional experts, yet again devaluing the social symbolic contribution of practitioners in language education' (p. 201).

*Language as Symbolic Power* draws from applied linguistics, cultural and linguistic anthropology, cultural studies, feminism, philosophy, politics, psychology, sociolinguistics, and more to make its case with originality, intellectual prowess, and cogently analyzed examples. It invites us to focus on the symbolic effects of discourse and in so doing increases our understanding of how we shape the world and how the world shapes us in online, offline, and liminal spaces. It invites us to wonder, talk, and teach about how the symbolic power of language might help us better understand and resist a world fraught with deeply entrenched inequalities, racism, political populism, and climate injustices.